

Which Light

by Lt. David Souza

Just another night in the GCA pattern before another at-sea, work-up period. A few quick trips around the pattern, a period in the LSO shack, and I'd be home by nine. No sweat.

We launched into the beautiful Whidbey night after being drenched during preflight. On the third pass, I let the nose drop and showed paddles a less-than-pristine effort. As I lifted off, I shouted an expletive over the ICS, which got the attention of my lone back-seater, who thought something was wrong. I reassured him I was just venting at my ball-flying abilities; we had a good laugh.

On pass number four, I wasn't going to let the ball or nose drop, so I concentrated on them all the way down. I touched down with a centered ball and started to climb. I raised the gear handle and was ready to praise my flying skills when the left engine-temp light illuminated. I used the same expletive as on the previous pass. The left engine-fire light illuminated about a second later, and I turned the jet downwind.

Now, try as hard as they can, the multi-place aircraft FRSs cannot beat the single-seat mentality that is ingrained in every pilot during an emergency. I secured the left engine and bleed-air valves, then raced through the single-engine-landing checklist faster than you can say "NATOPS." The jet was configured and ready to land with flaps at 20 degrees, RAT out, and hook down, before we got through 90 degrees of turn.

My right-seater asked, "What are you doing?" when he realized the left engine was winding down.

I told him we had a left engine-fire light.

He said, "Gang bar off." This is first step in any Prowler fire or temp emergency. My mind went back to reality. I told him the engine and gang bar were off, and that he should declare an emergency, and switch tower. I started going over the checklist again in my mind. The fire lights went out, and I breathed a little easier. I heard him tell tower we were abeam and landing. What had I forgotten?

Photo-composite by Patricia Eaton

What Was It?

Oh yeah! “Fire light depress” was step 3 in the fire-light checklist. When you press the fire light, you discharge an engine-bay halon system, which helps extinguish fires. But with seven fire and temp lights, which one was the left? I couldn’t tell because it had gone out, and I never took the time to memorize the position of each fire light.

I moved on to important things, such as the landing checklist. “Hook down, three do... Oops! Gear’s coming.” Glad I caught that one. With the jet now configured, I had my right seater shine my Grimes light on the fire lights. We were passing through the 90. The backseater notified tower we were taking an arrested landing. I peeked at the runway and realized we were going to overshoot centerline, big time. I went to mil, stepped even harder on the left rudder, and overbanked the jet. I looked down at the slip ball, of all things, and realized my folly. Always step on the good motor! A voice in my head said, “No chance Paddles, wave off.” Centerline had come and gone, and there was still no end to the turn in sight. The arresting gear was 1,800 feet down the runway. I told my rightseater I was not going to fly the ball—I was going to set it down just before the gear. Meanwhile, he was shining the light on the fire lights, and I still could not distinguish between them. I told him to forget it and to lock his harness.

The landing was uneventful. Before we got to the cable, I found and depressed the fire light, completing my end of the bargain. The jet stopped, and I just sat there. “Are you getting out?” asked my right seater.

“You bet,” I said. I shut down and climbed out on the wing. It was wet, and I couldn’t figure out how to get off without breaking my leg. I had practiced this a couple times on my own but always with the slats up. With them down, it now seemed impossible. Luckily, the fire crew was right there and lowered the ladders.

After we found no residual fire, we opened the engine bay and inspected it. We found a broken fuel-line drain and some melted, blistered wires.


One of our plane captains arrived, and I rode brakes for him back to the line.

Maintenance determined the cause of the fire was a failed weld on the engine-bleed-air line. The failure occurred between the engine and the bleed-air-shut-off valve. This could have had catastrophic results, despite my flying abilities. The bleed air comes out of the engine at a temperature much higher than the flash point of JP-5, which had been dripping on the inside of the engine bay from the disconnected fuel-drain line.

My rightseater assumed I worked out a deal with Paddles to turn downwind after my fourth pass. Neither one knew we had an emergency until my rightseater asked what I was doing. He immediately did what he was trained to do and stated the boldface. Without him saying “gang bar off,” I’m not sure my mind could’ve juggled all the checklists. A single-seat mentality isn’t all that great for single-seat aircraft, but for multi-place, complex aircraft, like the Prowler, aircrew coordination is a must.

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Memorize the location of the important fire lights. You might need to press some of them even if they go out and you can’t see them.

Lastly, learn how to get out of your jet quickly without the help of the boarding ladder or ground crew. I thought I had it suitcased. I had practiced sliding off the slats, onto the drop tank, then down. The thought never even crossed my mind that the slats would most likely be down if I had to egress. I since have learned to slide down the flaps onto a pod. 

Lt. Souza flies with VAQ-131.